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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TUNIS 002639

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SUBJECT: TUNISIAN EMBASSY IN QATAR CLOSED TO PROTEST
AL-JAZEERA

REF: TUNIS 2565 (NOTAL)

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES a.i. DAVID BALLARD FOR REASONS 1.4 (b)
AND (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. On October 25, the Tunisian MFA announced the closure of Tunisia's embassy in Qatar, citing al-Jazeera's lack of objectivity. The announcement followed numerous international media reports that Tunisia had withdrawn its ambassador in protest over al-Jazeera coverage of Tunisian domestic issues, particularly the GOT's recent crackdown on wearing the veil. The decision is not surprising given the lack of press freedom in Tunisia and strong GOT sensitivities to criticism. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Following several pan-Arab media reports that Tunisia had withdrawn its ambassador from Doha, the MFA released an official statement on October 25 (complete text para 5) announcing "the end of its diplomatic representation to Qatar and the closing of the Tunisian embassy in Doha". (NOTE: While no official date was given, the pan-Arab daily al-Quds al-Arabi reported the decision was taken on October 16. END NOTE.) In its official statement, the MFA cited al-Jazeera's "hostile campaign meant to harm Tunisia...a country which respects and practices freedom of opinion and of speech." During an October 26 parliamentary session, Foreign Minister Abdelwaheb Abdallah, explained "We have great patience and have overcome criticism, defamation, lying and slander," but that al-Jazeera's recent "incitement of civil strife is unacceptable." Following his comments, some Deputies voiced their support for the GOT's decision to close the embassy.

¶3. (C) Al-Jazeera, which enjoys a large Tunisian audience, regularly covers Tunisian political news, including political activism, protests and arrests. Most recently, the channel aired a program on the GOT campaign against the hijab (reftel). The GOT has long disliked al-Jazeera's coverage of Tunisia and has refused to renew the professional identification card of the station's Tunisian correspondent, Lotfi Hajji. Hajji's ability to work locally as a journalist is thus severely limited, although he does produce written articles for al-Jazeera's website.

¶4. (C) Hajji told PolOff that the recent appearance of Tunisian political activist and leader of the unregistered Congress for the Republic party Moncef Marzouki on al-Jazeera was "the straw that broke the camel's back." (NOTE: According to press reports and embassy contacts, Tunisian

authorities have convoked Marzouki, who returned to Tunisia on October 21 from a self-imposed exile in Paris, on charges of domestic incitement related to his al-Jazeera appearance. END NOTE.) Hajji opined that the GOT only chose to publicize its actions because the international press coverage was widespread.

15. (C) The Qatari DCM, Mubarak Nasser al-Khalifa, in Tunis confirmed to the Charg that the Tunisian Ambassador to Qatar, Mohammed Saad, departed around October 15. Al-Khalifa stressed that the Qatari mission to Tunisia continues to operate and all staff, including the ambassador, are present.

16. (C) While not the first country to use diplomatic maneuvering to protest al-Jazeera coverage, Tunisia's action is characteristic of its desire to control every aspect of news about the regime. (NOTE: Reporters Without Borders recently ranked Tunisia 148 of 168 in its 2006 World Press Freedom Index. END NOTE.) For months, Tunisian newspapers have published editorials condemning al-Jazeera and the Qatari government. The MFA announcement - which was covered by all local newspapers - was predictably accompanied by similar editorials supporting the GOT move and denouncing al-Jazeera. In the Arabic language as-Sabah, an unidentified author criticized al-Jazeera's unwillingness "to shed light on (Qatari) domestic issues, including human rights, stripping nationals of their citizenship, and foreign military bases," as well as the upcoming visit to Qatar of Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni.

17. (C) COMMENT: While the GOT's policies usually seek the middle ground, in this case it allowed its aversion to criticism trump its "get along" policy. Despite its claims that freedom of expression is "a fundamental choice" of the

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Tunisian regime, the end of diplomatic relations betrays the GOT belief that governments should control media. Given the relatively insignificant Tunisian-Qatari bilateral relationship, it is unlikely Tunisian diplomats will be returning to Doha in the near future. END COMMENT.

18. (U) Full Text of MFA Statement (Tunisian Press Agency translation):

Begin Text:

Qatari Al-Jazeera television channel has turned its back on truth and objectivity every time it has focused on news in Tunisia, showing in this way despise for the elementary rules of ethics and leading a hostile campaign meant to harm Tunisia.

In the face of a behavior of this kind, Tunisia, customarily, has shown restraint and has seen sense in order to preserve the fraternity and co-operation relations between the two countries and to safeguard the close ties binding the two sisterly countries' leaders and peoples.

Tunisia, a country which respects and practices freedom of opinion and of speech and appreciates to its true worth honest information, has espoused these noble values and made of them a fundamental choice of its political orientations. For Tunisia, freedom of opinion and of speech is also a solemn pledge both in actions and words. Nonetheless, by its deliberately malevolent stands towards Tunisia, Al-Jazeera television channel has gone beyond all limits and transgressed the moral rules on which journalistic practice is based.

Furthermore, such stands are in total contradiction with the principle of freedom of expression, as they incite to trouble-making and sedition, which is a violation of international laws and practices and the values on which relations between states are grounded.

In the face of such a dangerous turn of events, Tunisia decided to put an end to its diplomatic representation in Qatar and to close its embassy in Doha, in spite of the esteem and respect it vows to this sisterly country.

End Text.

BALLARD